

**INSIDE**

page 4

**Market survey proves its worth**

page 7

**Barn exhibit tours state**

Published by the Minnesota Historical Society

for county and local historical societies and heritage preservation commissions

## Giving voice to newcomers

### Exhibits tell stories of Somali, Hmong, Latino immigrants

Three cultures. One exhibit. Many stories. For visitors to the Blue Earth County Historical Society in Mankato two years ago, it was an eye-opening experience. There they met, through words and pictures, women of Somali, Hmong and Mexican heritage, all immigrants to the south-central Minnesota community.

"Their stories have not been heard until now," said Penka Skachkova, assistant professor of women's studies at Minnesota State University. Before the exhibit opened, she noted, "these women were largely invisible."

The same could probably be said for newcomers to communities across Minnesota. But some of the state's historical organizations have been working to change that.

#### Student project leaves a legacy

At MSU, Skachkova and a group of her graduate students devised a semester-long project to interview women whose families had immigrated to the area. The 28 women shared their stories - of fleeing civil war in Somalia, of life in refugee camps in Thailand, of work as migrant farm laborers in Minnesota fields. Despite their varied circumstances, the newcomers

shared the same challenges faced by all immigrants who have made a new home in a strange land - language barriers, unfamiliar customs, loneliness, a desire to help those left behind.

The project culminated in the exhibit at the Blue Earth County Historical Society, giving voice to groups too seldom represented in local museums. Photos of the women and their families graced the walls, along with excerpts from their interviews and artifacts from their native cultures loaned for display. Oral history tapes and transcripts were donated to the county historical society.

"We're very glad to have the area's more recent history represented in our collections," said BECHS director James Lundgren. "Too many historical societies focus on history only up through World War II. But what will be important historically to future generations is what's happening now."



Photo by John Cross, Mankato Free Press

Mankato resident Lul Ahmed, a native of Somalia, visits an exhibit about immigrant women at the Blue Earth County Historical Society.

#### From the mouths of children

Interviews also provided the impetus for an exhibit at the Lyon County Historical Society in Marshall. The idea was born in 1999 when

Giving voice continued on page 2

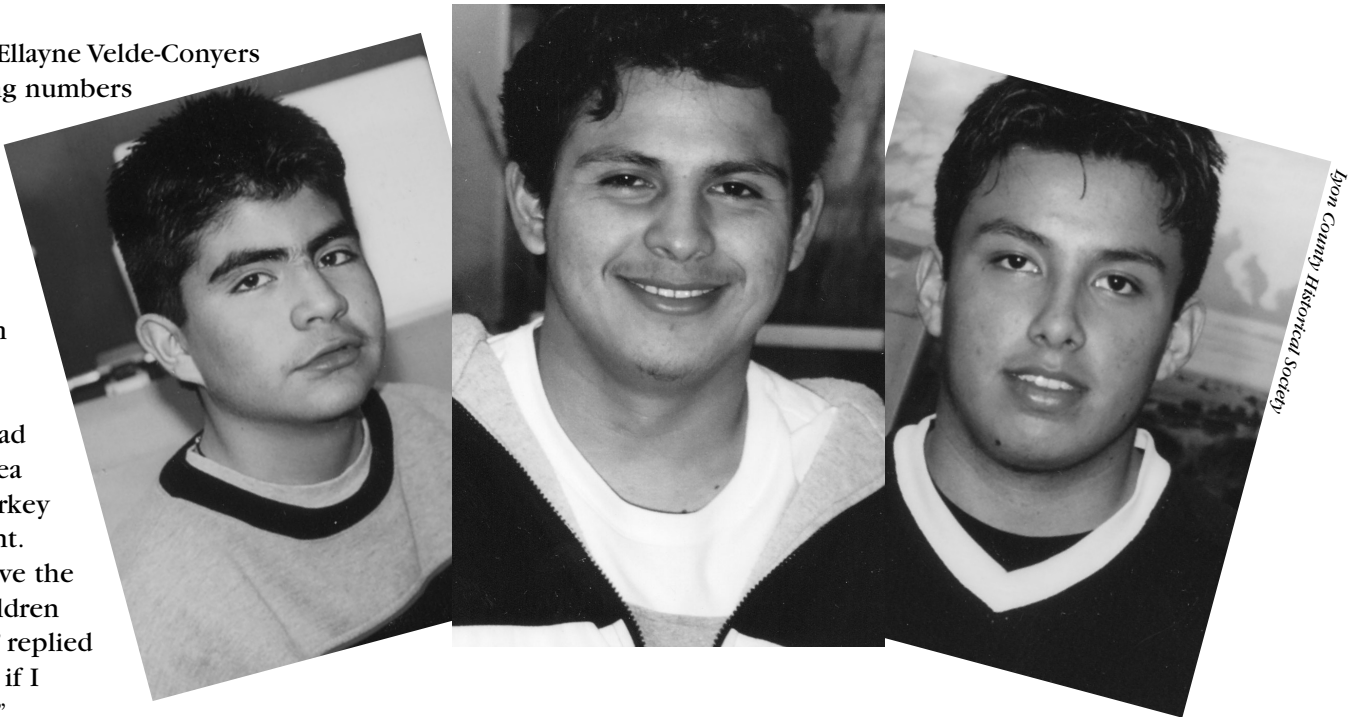
## Giving voice *continued from page 1*

LCCHS director Ellayne Velde-Conyers noticed growing numbers of Somali and Latino youngsters visiting the museum on school tours. She asked them if she could interview their parents, who had come to the area to work at a turkey processing plant. "They don't have the words," the children told her. "Well," replied Conyers, "what if I interview you?"

She drew inspiration from Marshall's Community Circles program, which brings together local residents and community newcomers at the museum and other sites around town to get to know one another and share mutual concerns. Explains Conyers, "I took as the motto for my project a quote from their materials: 'Perhaps the most important step toward spreading understanding is involving the youngest generation.'"

And so an exhibit took shape. She asked a group of children from Mexico and Somalia about their experiences in Minnesota, took their photographs and located their countries of birth on a big map. "It was not a sophisticated exhibit," says Conyers, "but it gave the kids a sense of belonging." Along with the expected answers to such interview questions as "What do you like about America?" ("Nikes" and "Hummers") came the unexpected - "No one shoots at me here."

Conyers's interest in the children also generated an after-school



**Sergio, Carlos and Luis, all from Mexico, found themselves part of an exhibit at the Lyon County Historical Society after sharing their stories about immigrating to Minnesota.**

homework project for 35 students from the nearby junior high. A local company donated computers, a service organization provided refreshments, and volunteers took the students home afterwards. The program soon outgrew the museum's space and staff time and was eventually turned over to the school.

**"Their stories have not been heard until now."**

*Penka Skachkova  
Minnesota State University*

"Most of our Somali community moved to St. Cloud a while back when the turkey plant closed," notes Conyers. "But their stay here is part of our community's history. We learned a lot about each other."

### **An artful eye**

Words and pictures told the story in a 2003 exhibit at the Hennepin History Museum titled "Minneapolis and St. Paul are East African Cities." A collaboration between the museum and the Walker Art Center, the exhibit came together under the guidance of the Walker's artist-in-residence Julie Mehretu.

Twenty students of East African descent from Minneapolis high schools were given cameras, film and an introduction to photography and turned loose to document their daily activities. Through more than 1,000 images, along with ambient sound recordings, they opened a window into one of Hennepin County's fastest-growing immigrant communities.

"Like immigrant groups before them," wrote museum administrator Todd Mahon in HHM News, the students revealed "the delights and struggles of adolescents adapting to



a new culture.” All their photos, recordings and project journals are now part of the History Museum’s permanent collection. The images also appear on the project web site: [tcEastAfrica.walkerart.org](http://tcEastAfrica.walkerart.org).

**“What will be important to future generations is what’s happening now.”**

*James Lundgren  
Blue Earth County  
Historical Society*

### Building bridges

Freeborn County Historical Society’s exhibit, “Mexican-American Pioneers,” grew out of an exhibit some years ago about the town of Hollandale, founded on rich farmland at the site of a drained lake. At the



Hennepin History Museum

Minneapolis teenager Zuhur Ahmed from East Africa captured the daily activities of her friends on film for an exhibit at the Hennepin History Museum.

time of the earlier exhibit, the town’s Dutch settlers weren’t comfortable including mention of the migrant workers brought in as farm labor. “We needed to tell the rest of the story,” says FCHS director Bev Jackson. So she sought help from one of the museum’s longtime tour guides, Lupe Gasca.

“Lupe gathered some of his friends and family members to talk about their experiences and their

impressions of the community,” recounts Jackson. “At first they wanted me to just listen. Eventually they let me record their stories, which became the core of our exhibit, along with artifacts from our collections and items they loaned us.”

Building bridges to the local immigrant community proved a winning strategy for the Stearns History Museum as well. To accompany “Americanos: Latino Life in the United States,” a traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution, the Stearns County museum’s staff and board recruited a committee of Latino volunteers who brought their local perspective to the project (see *Interpreter*, March-April 2004). “They helped us market the exhibit, find sponsors and plan special events,” explains David Ebnet, executive director of the Stearns County Historical Society. “The public response has been fantastic.”

Ebnet hopes to maintain the new relationships established with the Latino community. “We’re talking about doing some oral histories,” he says. “Their stories are an important part of our county history. We want to make sure we represent them well at our museum. That will give them a reason to make the historical society an ongoing part of their lives.”

*Information from an article by Rachael Hanel in the Mankato Free Press, May 7, 2002, was used, with permission, for this story.*



Freeborn County Historical Society

Mexican native Lupe Gasca, a longtime Albert Lea resident, volunteers as a tour guide at the Freeborn County Historical Society. Here he explains rail repair equipment to visitors.

# Know your audience

## Survey tool can boost visitation, improve programming

What's the best way to find out what your public wants? Ask them!

It worked wonders for the Rockford Area Historical Society. When Wendy Biorn assumed the job of RAHS museum coordinator in 2001, the organization was laboring under a large deficit and low visitation. She wanted to know why. So the next spring, putting to good use her degree in business administration and marketing, she devised a survey to learn all she could about what area residents thought of the society.

### Doing it right

"My Augsburg College professor helped us shape the project," explains Biorn. "We sent out a blanket survey to our target market - people living within 20 to 30 miles of the museum. To get a random sampling, we picked several postal carrier regions in our zip code. We needed to be sure we

reached two groups: those who came to the museum and those who didn't. To get a good return, we kept the survey short and easy to complete - 15 to 20 questions. And to guarantee unbiased data, we were careful not to ask leading questions; most had answers you could just circle. We also enclosed a token of our appreciation - coupons for free admission to the museum."

Biorn hoped the survey project would generate two results: stronger programming and higher visitation. By learning more about who was coming to the museum and why, she could fine-tune RAHS programming to give visitors just what they wanted. By learning what kept some people away, she could begin making changes to raise attendance figures.

### Simple changes bring dramatic results

What she learned surprised her. While the society's small membership was largely older citizens, most of the surrounding communities were filled with young families of modest means. Yet there were few programs for children, and the museum's admission fees and program costs were unaffordable to many.

Gradually, Biorn put new programs into play. To attract new visitors, she began targeting youngsters with after-school programs and summer day camps. To counter



Courtesy of the Drummer

Family-friendly programming has brought a younger crowd to Rockford Area Historical Society events.

notions of the museum as a static, "do not touch" venue, she introduced changing displays and hands-on activities. And she replaced some program fees with a donation jar. "We ended up making more money through donations than we did with fees," she notes.

By the end of 2002, visitation to the museum had more than doubled from the year before, erasing the deficit and producing a positive cash flow. The next year brought another 25-percent jump in attendance. "Getting to know our audience really paid off," says Biorn.

Her best advice? "All college students majoring in marketing have to do a market survey as a senior project. If you have a college near you, get one of the students to take on your survey as their project. It's a very affordable way to get the job done."

To learn more about the RAHS survey project, call Wendy Biorn at 763-477-5383 or e-mail [rahs@usinternet.com](mailto:rahs@usinternet.com).

## Help MHS serve you better

Watch for the May arrival of the Minnesota Historical Society's annual survey of historical organizations. It keeps us up to date on how you do business - your best practices, visitation numbers, budget needs and more. That knowledge is our best ammunition in making the case for the vital role you play in your communities.

So take a few minutes to complete the survey and return it promptly. Your responses will help us make sure you get the training and support you need.

# New book covers basics of museum administration

A review by Timothy Glines, MHS manager of outreach services

A book with the title *Museum Administration: An Introduction* may not make many best-seller lists. But this new publication from the American Association for State and Local History has much to offer those of us involved with Minnesota's historical organizations.

Written by Hugh H. Genoways and Lynne M. Ireland, the book grew out of a museum studies class the two teach at the University of Nebraska. While it is aimed generally at those holding or training for positions in museums of all kinds, I certainly recommend the book to employees of historical organizations.

## A good overview for board members

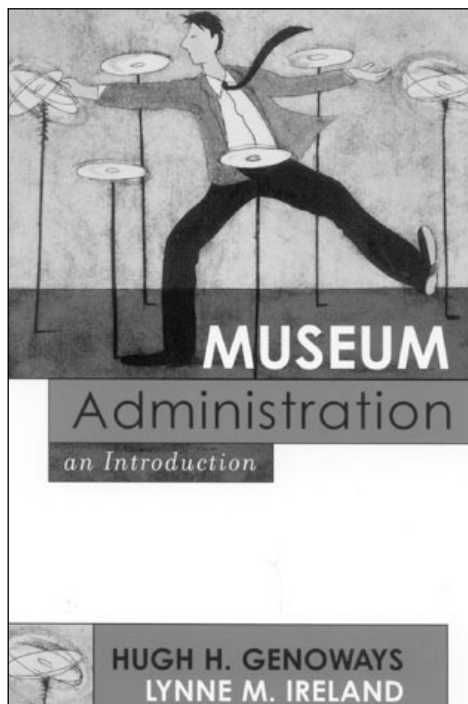
I also think there is a larger audience for the book: the many volunteer board members who set the direction and policy for nonprofit museums and historical societies. Board members often lack formal training or previous experience in museum work, and this book provides a comprehensive overview of the many important matters a responsible trustee should understand.

In 15 chapters the authors cover topics ranging from strategic planning, governance, and legal and ethical issues to personnel, facilities management, fundraising and marketing to collections management and programming. Exercises and case studies throughout allow you to practice what you're learning.

## Highlights

Some chapters are particularly strong. "Budgets and Accounting" should be very helpful to organizations needing to strengthen their financial systems. The chapter

on development (fundraising) is equally strong. And many readers will benefit from the discussion of legal issues, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, unrelated business income and copyright laws.



Collections management is one of the subjects most difficult for new board members to understand. A thorough discussion of collections management policies makes it clear why this aspect of historical society administration is so important. And the emphasis on planning makes this book beneficial for the leaders of organizations ready to develop a strategic plan or planning to hire a director for the first time.

## Some shortcomings

The book falls short in a few respects. Because the focus is on museums, it does not address some topics that are of interest to historical

organizations. Historic preservation, for example, is not included. Readers looking for ideas on public programs for history museums also may be disappointed with the relatively brief chapter on programs. However, a bibliography provides sources for further reading.

Another drawback for some of Minnesota's history museum community is that not all the material applies to smaller organizations. Although the authors aim to scale their ideas to a variety of situations and organizations, there are many references to larger departments of staff specializing in various aspects of museum work. Here in Minnesota, only a few of us work in places structured that way. I urge patience to readers who initially think this book is not written for them. Skip over things that clearly do not apply to small local organizations and concentrate on the many ideas you can bring to your own situation.

## A useful tool

*Museum Administration: An Introduction* evolved from the authors' wide-ranging experience in the field. And their teaching experience helped them organize the material in a straightforward, usable format. Their perspective that museums (and, by extension, historical organizations) exist for a public purpose permeates the entire book. Although many of you may end up using only parts of the book, it is a volume that deserves a prominent place on the reference shelf of every historical organization.

*Museum Administration: An Introduction* by Hugh H. Genoways and Lynne M. Ireland (AltaMira Press, 2003, paper \$29.95, 376 pp., ISBN 0-7591-0294-5) may be ordered online at [altamirapress.com/Catalog](http://altamirapress.com/Catalog).



## Winona County society joins online network

### Library databases mean easy access to far-flung collections

**H**oldings of the Winona County Historical Society are now accessible online through MnLINK, the statewide library information network ([www.mnlink.org](http://www.mnlink.org)). Thanks to a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Minnesota's Southeast Library System (SELS) has partnered with the Winona County society to add its records to the library database.

SELS is a participating member of MnLINK. Sister organization SELCO (Southeast Libraries Cooperating) already offers a similar search tool for

collections of the Olmsted County Historical Society ([www.selco.lib.mn.us/resources/olmhst/](http://www.selco.lib.mn.us/resources/olmhst/)).

Among other historical resources that can be searched on MnLINK, which encompasses most Minnesota public and academic libraries, are records of the Minnesota Historical Society (also at [www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org)), the Stearns History Museum and the Dakota County Historical Society.

If all these acronyms leave you reeling, you might want to call John Christenson, interim director of the Nicollet County Historical Society

(507-934-2160). Christenson, formerly head of the Traverse des Sioux Regional Library System, is well-versed in local history research via the Internet. He was instrumental in getting Treaty Site History Center materials into the TdS WebPALS online catalog ([www.tds.msus.edu](http://www.tds.msus.edu)). And he's willing to offer advice by phone or e-mail ([tshc@hickorytech.net](mailto:tshc@hickorytech.net)). He'll also send you a copy of the NCHS newsletter, *The Crossing*, in which he shares tips with his readers on the wealth of information at their fingertips.

## 'Minnesota Reflections'

### Statewide project creates digital photo library

The Minnesota Digital Library Coalition (MDLC) has begun creating its first collection, a digital photo library titled "Minnesota Reflections." Working with the state's libraries, archives, historical societies and museums, MDLC will digitize up to 10,000 photographic images and postcards depicting Minnesota before 1909. The digitized images will then be accessible to the public over the World Wide Web. The project, designed to document Minnesota's first 50 years of statehood, will pave the way for celebration of the state's sesquicentennial in 2008.

If you're interested in providing images from your organization's collection to the project, you may submit a digitization project proposal before the February 2005 deadline. Grant funds from the Minnesota Department of Education's Libraries and School Technology unit will finance the project. See the Call for Proposals on the MDLC web site at [www.mndigital.org/Call4Projects.pdf](http://www.mndigital.org/Call4Projects.pdf).

Questions? Call grant coordinator Marian Rengel at St. Cloud State University, 320-308-5625, or e-mail [mrrengel@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:mrrengel@stcloudstate.edu).

## Planning for collections preservation

**I**f you're thinking of undertaking a preservation project for your paper-based collections, here's an important first step you won't want to miss. The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts offers an onsite organizational survey that includes a comprehensive assessment of your preservation needs. Evaluating such areas as museum environment, security, storage, handling and exhibition, and disaster preparedness, the survey can serve as a foundation for long-term preservation planning. Such a tool also is instrumental in securing grant funding for preservation projects.

The cost for a survey is \$350. A limited number of subsidized surveys are available through an NEH grant. Application deadline: July 1, 2004. For more information or an application form, call the Preservation Services Office of the CCAHA at 215-545-0613 or e-mail [CCAHA@ccaaha.org](mailto:CCAHA@ccaaha.org).

## 'Barn Again!'

### Smithsonian exhibit on two-year state tour

That icon of rural life, the barn, takes center stage in an exhibit now making the rounds of 11 Minnesota sites. Developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service's Museum on Main Street,

"Barn Again!" examines the barn's place in America's agricultural heritage. Photo panels display barn types, scale models show regional building techniques, and artifacts chart the evolution of American agriculture.

The exhibit's statewide tour is sponsored by the Minnesota Humanities Commission, which, along with the Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums, is assisting local sites in developing outreach

activities. Among events planned are

barn tours, school fairs, oral histories and writing contests.

#### 2004 dates

Remaining on the 2004 schedule are stops at:

- Stevens County Historical Society, May 1 - June 27
- Wright County Historical Society, July 3 - Aug. 15
- Minnesota State Fair, Aug. 23 - Sept. 6
- Goodhue County Historical Society, Sept. 18 - Oct. 31

#### 2005 stops

In 2005 the exhibit will stop at the following historical societies (specific dates to be determined):

- Pipestone County, January - February
- Itasca County, March - April
- Pennington County, May - June
- Marshall County, July - August
- Cottonwood County, September - October

For more information go to [thinkmhc.org/Public/barn.htm](http://thinkmhc.org/Public/barn.htm).



Red River Valley dairy barn, Cass County, North Dakota, 1940. From the traveling exhibit "Barn Again!"

## Grand Excursion

### Riverboat flotilla headed for St. Paul

On July 4, a flotilla of riverboats will steam into St. Paul, concluding an 11-day journey upriver from St. Louis, Missouri. Stops along the way will draw attention to the revitalized riverfronts of cities in four states. Billed as the Grand Excursion, the event is a recreation of an 1854 trek by former President Millard Fillmore, who led a group of Easterners on a cross-country adventure by rail and steamboat to celebrate completion of the first railroad to reach the Mississippi.

For the Minnesota leg of the 2004 journey, travelers have their pick of events planned in counties whose histories were shaped by the river. A sampling of programs presented by local Grand Excursion committees:

**Winona County:** On June 30 Mark Peterson, director of the Winona County Historical Society, speaks aboard the Celebration Belle about the river town's history. Costumed interpreters will be on hand all day in Winona to guide visitors around the historic downtown.

**Wabasha County:** A new exhibit runs June 25 to July 4 at the Wabasha County Historical Society's Reads Landing River Museum and Reads Landing Historic Schoolhouse. Through photos and artifacts, it tells stories of the area's riverboat-building, clamming industry, pearl button-making and more.

**Goodhue County:** In a June 30 talk, local historian Frederick L. Johnson sets the scene for the first

*Grand Excursion continued on page 8*

## Grand Excursion *continued from page 7*

Grand Excursion, a time when the two-year-old frontier community of Red Wing was teaming with land-hungry newcomers. Exhibits at the Goodhue County Historical Society and the Red Wing Visitors Center observe the county's sesquicentennial.

**Dakota County:** A quilt show mounted by the Dakota County Historical Society in Hastings City Hall features the handiwork of early settlers in this historic river town. Admission proceeds go toward restoration of the 1860s William LeDuc House.

**Washington County:** Authors Nancy and Robert Goodman visit the

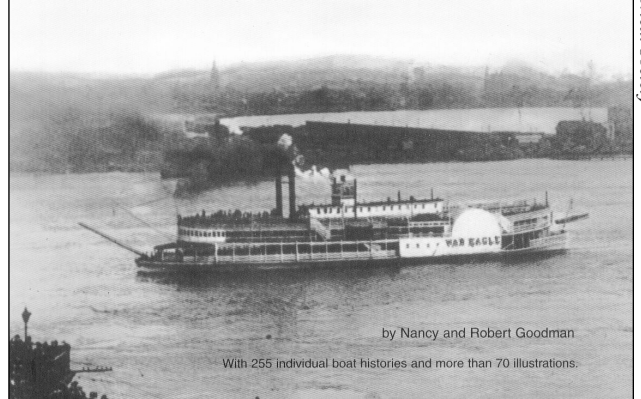
WPA Overlook in Newport on July 3 to sign copies of their book, *Paddlewheels on the Upper Mississippi, 1823-1854*, published by the Washington County Historical Society.

**Ramsey County:** Celebrate Independence Day, July 4, at Historic Fort Snelling.

For a full list of events in the Twin Cities and other communities, check the web site [www.grandexcursion.com](http://www.grandexcursion.com).

### *Paddlewheels on the Upper Mississippi 1823-1854*

How Steamboats Promoted Commerce and Settlement in the West



by Nancy and Robert Goodman

With 255 individual boat histories and more than 70 illustrations.

Washington County Historical Society

#### **Minnesota History Interpreter**

is published bimonthly by the Historic Preservation, Field Services and Grants Department of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Readers may submit news for publication. Send to Interpreter Editor, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul, MN 55102-1906.

Material from this issue may be reprinted with the following credit line: Reprinted with permission from *Minnesota History Interpreter*, May - June 2004, Vol. XXXII, No. 3, published by the Minnesota Historical Society. Do not reprint material taken from another source without permission.

On request, this publication is available in alternative formats: audiotape, large print or computer disk. Back issues can be found online at [www.mnhs.org/about/publications/interpreter.html](http://www.mnhs.org/about/publications/interpreter.html).

For address corrections e-mail [michele.decker@mnhs.org](mailto:michele.decker@mnhs.org) or call 651-296-5434. For other matters call Tim Glines at 651-296-5460 or e-mail [timothy.glines@mnhs.org](mailto:timothy.glines@mnhs.org).

**Britta Bloomberg**, Head,  
Historic Preservation, Field Services  
and Grants Department  
**Tim Glines**, Manager, Outreach Services  
**David Grabitske**, Grants and Field Programs  
Assistant  
**Mary Ann Nord**, Editor  
**Kate Raver**, Layout

[www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org)

## Minnesota Historical Society

345 Kellogg Boulevard West  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102-1906

**Address service requested.**

Non-Profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
St. Paul, MN  
Permit No. 854